West Africa

MILITARY INFORMATION SUPPORT OPERATIONS IN THE TRAN-SAHEL BY CAPTAIN JOHN BOEHNERT AND CAPTAIN JAMIE NASI

The West African landscape is dominated by the Saharan Desert that separates many of the centralized governments from portions of their populations. These countries are a mixture of several divergent ethnic groups that speak a wide range of languages and local dialects. These autochthonous groups not only have to contend with the harsh natural environment, but also a struggling economy that often cannot support its robust youth population.[1] Historically, the governments of the Trans-Sahel region of West Africa have been unstable with frequent regime changes and coups, which has precipitated frequent rearranging of national policies and priorities.[2] It is within this historical, political, and social context that violent extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Boko Haram, have sought to carve out a foothold and exploit the vast and largely ungoverned areas along the edge of the Sahel. VEOs have proven to be savvy social operators who exploit familial social allegiances and divisions, political instability and feeble economies in a bid to recruit, train, equip, sustain, deploy and retain fighters. The complicated nature of the natural, political and social environments creates a unique messaging problem set for the host-nation governments that often cannot be adequately addressed without external support and assistance.[3]

Military information support teams serve on the front lines of the United State's efforts to execute effective messaging and influence

operations in deployed locations around the world. MISTs based at Fort Bragg, N.C., are organized primarily by geographic area of specialization and provide the Department of Defense, interagency partners and select host-nation partners the messaging subject-matter expertise and nuanced cultural knowledge necessary to address the increasing spread of VEOs in the Sahel and counter the proliferation of violent-extremist ideology.[4]

MISTs in West Africa deploy in support of the United States Special Operations Command Africa and the U.S. country team, and assist the HN government and the U.S. Embassy in messaging operations, persuasion and influence campaigns and military-to-military engagements with the end state of creating behavior change in specific foreign audiences. Each MIST is composed of a blend of military occupational specialties that can be tailored to fit a specific operational environment. During the planning, execution and evaluation of military information support operations the MISTs coordinate their activities with other special-operations forces elements and the U.S. Embassy's country team in order maximize their messaging capabilities and message effectiveness. In order to accomplish their assigned missions and effectively counter the influence of VEOs, the MISTs employ a wide range of techniques and address a spectrum of counter VEO-related activities such as: advising and assisting host-

nation forces; combating trafficking and smuggling; and countering VE ideology. All MIST activities are nested in the various theater, operational and tactical plans as well as the U.S. Embassy's mission support resource plan. MISTs develop and execute all MISO series through and with the HN and/or partner-nation militaries, governments and civic organizations.[5]

Military to Military Engagements

MISTs contribute to engage with HN military forces through joint combined exercises for training, military exercises and other military-to-military engagement venues where MISTs advise and assist HN forces in the development of MISO-related skills and messaging capabilities. MIST input is tailored to the specific needs of each individual military unit and their primary mission and can be executed in conjunction with other military training such as small unit tactics, mission planning or weapons training.

At the most rudimentary level, the MIST works to increase unit professionalism and effectiveness by providing training modules that are designed to increase the military organization's esprit de corps and instill an ethically-based decision making process for use in their operational environment.[6] Effective and cohesive small units are the building blocks of successful militaries, and this is especially true in the case of the Sahel region where vast terrain, minimal communication networks and limited manpower resources necessitate a more decentralized approach to internal security and military operations.

Building upon this basic foundation, the MIST may also provide assistance in the creation, development and training of a curriculum that advises the HN unit in the most effective employment of key-leader engagements and the formation of developed talking points. This provides the basic skills necessary for the unit to conduct tactical-level messaging during the course of military operations. Positive and effective messaging between HN militaries and the civilian populace they come into contact with on a daily basis fosters trust, builds credibility and helps to retain the cooperation of the population leading ultimately to an increase in the effectiveness of the military unit to accomplish their assigned mission.[7]

Many segments of the local HN population have had only infrequent interaction with the their military, many of which have historically utilized authoritative and heavy-handed tactics towards civilian populaces. Soft skills and communications' techniques have proven to be effective especially when complemented with humanitarian-assistance programs and community-outreach activities.[8]

In addition to unit-level training, the MIST may also provide the HN militaries with specific technical assistance such as multimedia graphic illustrator support in order to create a more professional and developed messaging product that will effectively engage the selected target audiences. Technical assistance from the MIST not only increases HN capacity in the short term and serves as an opportunity to come side-by-side with the partner nation to provide mentorship, but also allows the HN to expand its sphere of influence at a manageable rate while continuing to perform its current obligations.

Beyond unilateral assistance to HN forces the MIST plays an important role in coordinating messaging during multi-national exercises between the HN military, foreign militaries and the U.S. interagency community. Large multi-nation exercises, such as Exercise Flintlock, which is held annually in West Africa, provides an excellent training opportunity for the MIST to work closely with their HN military partners to both train and execute

a strategic communications plan that is nested in the larger exercise plan.[9] The MIST serves as the primary liaison between the participating military units and the other exercise participants in the planning and execution of the exercise's communications plan, which occurs both within HN leading up to the commencement of the exercises and continues for the duration of the exercise between both military exercise participants and the inhabitants of the exercise's hosting country.

Anti-Trafficking/Anti-Smuggling

Another important area of the MIST focus in the Trans-Sahel region is the issue of trafficking and smuggling. The region is characterized by thousands of kilometers of national borders most of which lie in sparsely populated regions on the edge of the Sahara desert. These vast borders are rarely marked, poorly enforced and often times disregarded by the local populations whose traditional lands were established far before today's modern borders. The net effect is extremely porous national borders, which allow for the often-unregulated movement of persons, weapons and illicit goods. The lucrative business of trafficking and smuggling across these borders benefits both criminal and VEOs and is a continuing challenge to the national sovereignty and security of the affected West African nations.[10]

MIST efforts to combat trafficking and smuggling in the Sahel have focused primarily in the areas of increasing the capacity of law enforcement and border officials and creating attitudinal change in order to engage local populaces. The MIST's engagement with the HN may occur at the local, regional or national level depending upon the structure of the HN's current border authority and security forces, and the unique threat situation of the affected country. Many local populations in border areas have historically not taken ownership or responsibility for the illicit activities that occur in the regions where they reside. Smugglers and traffickers are often viewed by these populations as businessmen, entrepreneurs, or, at worst opportunists.[11] These prevailing perceptions make the enactment of reporting hotlines or even rudimentary cooperation with law enforcement difficult and largely unsuccessful.

In order to address this issue MISTs have pursued an approach where messaging campaigns are conducted in partnership with local or national-level border enforcement authorities in order to link negative societal conditions such as communal violence and weapons proliferation with the criminal actors who traffic the majority of the small arms, munitions and explosives into the affected communities. Once an attitudinal change has taken place, the groundwork is then set for the MIST to proceed with MISO series that can achieve behavior change in the target audience.

A second approach employed by MISTs is the collection, publication and dissemination of effective tactics, techniques and protocols for the interdiction of smuggled goods. Working with HN authorities to capture their most effective practices, and marrying them with lessons learned from other countries and theaters, enables the MIST to provide instructional materials that are used to increase the HN's capacity to combat smugglers and traffickers. This methodology has proven to be particularly effective in cases where a new threat has emerged more quickly than the HN's ability to identify the most effective techniques to combat it.

A recent example is the rise of homemade explosives and their employment in vehicle-borne IEDs. In this case, West African MISTs worked quickly to disseminate the information and tech-

niques that would equip the HN's security forces with the information necessary to allow them to effectively identify and interdict this previously unseen threat.

A final approach to the Trans-Sahel issues of trafficking and smuggling harnesses the power of emerging cellular communications technologies. In the past two decades an explosion of cell-phone use has occurred in West Africa. The rate of mobile phone usage is growing by 50 to 60 percent a year, faster than anywhere else in the world."[12] The spread of cellular service (particularly in to more remote regions) has allowed for the establishment of national-emergency call lines (similar to 911 in the United States and 999 or 112 in the UK). These HN operated call centers can be used to not only contact emergency services but also in some cases to serve as a tip line for the local populace to provide information to the HN security services.

In order to aid in the establishment and acceptance of national emergency lines, MISTs have developed a multi-stage approach that begins with the socialization and popularization of the national line through an educational information campaign. Once the targeted population has been informed and support has been garnered for the new national call line, the campaign then transitions to additional messaging that disseminates detailed instructions mixed with social reinforcement for the use of the line in order to provide tips and in-

already present, albeit often not to a degree where they are currently achieving the desired effect. Time and again, the utilization of a local credible voice has proven to be a best practice in the countering of VEI.

Once a credible voice has been identified and their personal/organizational background, messaging history, and activities examined for suitability of partnership, the MIST begins the development of a robust messaging plan (referred to as a MISO series) designed to increase the effectiveness of the partner's messaging and ensure the proper targeting and scope of the desired audience. Central to the development of the MISO series is the identification of current target-audience behavior and the establishment of metrics that will allow the MIST to evaluate series progress over time and facilitate in the periodic evaluation and necessary improvements over the life of the series.

MISTs tailor their support to locally identified messaging partners to best meet the needs of the partner organization and the mutually desired end state of the messaging campaign. MISTs will often provide subject-matter expertise and technical advice in the area of target-audience selection, message construction, product development, data collection and measures of effectiveness. Additionally, the MIST has the ability to not only contract locally for messaging products but also to coordinate for the production assets of the Media

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formation to security forces. Finally, depending on the particular HN, the media campaign may be supplemented by a rewards program to encourage use, reinforce the newly formed behavior and increase the programs overall effectiveness.

Countering Violent Extremist Ideology

MISTs are ideally suited to address the growing issue of the proliferation of VEI in West Africa. As communication networks in the region expand, youth and vulnerable populations are increasingly exposed to the ideology, teachings and messaging of violent extremist organizations who seek to garner popular support, recruit new members and justify their actions to a worldwide audience.[13]

The reality of the West-African messaging landscape is that extremist ideology does not exist in a vacuum, nor does it go unchallenged. There is, however, in many regions a pronounced messaging imbalance with moderate and conservative viewpoints underrepresented in the media environment.[14] This may occur for many reasons including a lack of qualified spokespersons, a lack of training or sophistication in messaging activity, a lack of funding available for moderate messaging and/or a fear of violent reprisal against those who challenge the VEO's message.

The MIST's work in countering VEI often begins with the identification and vetting of credible local voices already active within the community who are advancing themes and messages consistent with the MIST's desired attitudinal or behavioral change. Most often a MIST will seek to identify and promote messages already organic to the environment in lieu of creating new and foreign messages. It is the rare messaging environment where the desired themes and messages are not

Operations Center at Fort Bragg, which is capable of producing and editing radio and TV broadcasts, as well as printed media.

Looking Toward the Future

Regionally, the Counter VEI , anti-trafficking/anti-smuggling and military-to-military engagement lines of influence are coordinated by the regional information support team. The RIST is charged with the synchronization of MISO efforts across the region as well as providing support to SOF elements operating in countries without a MIST present. The RIST and reports directly to and advises the theater special-operations command on all MISO relevant issues. RISTs are a critical entity in the coordination and synchronization of persistent MISO, such as MISTs and the planning and execution of episodic MIS engagements like JCETs and multi-national joint military exercises.

Regional training and exercise will continue to play an important role in the exchange of effective messaging tactics and are an important venue where partner nation forces learn and practice messaging and influence skills. U.S. MIS forces also have an opportunity to observe regional partner operations as well as foster communication and exchange between partners. Ultimately, this will allow for greater cooperation and the development of more coherent, complementing and reinforcing messaging themes between nations in the Tran-Sahel region that face similar and related problem sets.[15]

As new communications platforms and their uses continue to increase in the Trans-Sahel region, MIST teams are drafting plans and implementing series that capitalize on the growing popularity of the Internet and, specifically, social-media platforms. Although the total number of active users varies from country to country, and lags

behind more developed regions, the Internet is a growing messaging platform that can be used target and selectively disseminate messages to the growing youth bulge that comprise the majority of its users.[16] As seen in the case of the Arab Spring, social media, Internet-based news and information sites and even entertainment-based sites all serve both individually and collectively to bring Internet users together, facilitate communication, incubate and spread ideas and serve as a catalyst for action.[17] The implications for this technology on both local and national levels in the Sahel region likely constitutes the future of messaging and is an ever growing area of interest and activity for MISTs who will sit at the intersection of time-tested messaging practices and emerging technologies in the evolving media landscape of the Trans-Sahel region of West Africa. **SW**

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Notes

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PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS

PROFESSIONAL READING LIST